Scientific reaction to evidence for the yahoo or 'Australian Ape', 1882–1912

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Throughout much of the nineteenth century reports of something variously called the yahoo, hairy man or Australian ape—usually thought of as a remnant of some as yet undiscovered species of Australian animal—regularly emerged from the south-east corner of Australia. For long neglected, these records have in recent years been collected, published and subjected to debate.[1] Yet, despite this attention (or even because of it), the yahoo is still poorly understood.

In the main the difficulty appears twofold—linguistic and epistemological. As for the first, the word 'yahoo', though originally coined by Jonathan Swift, was applied to what was probably the orang-utan in early nineteenth-century England, which may well explain its subsequent (though different) use in Australia.[2] The term 'hairy man' has inevitably been a casualty of literalism, while the expression 'Australian ape' is here clarified for the first time. Secondly, the question of how we may have knowledge of such a creature is (as discussed in the concluding paragraph) usually answered by a demand that effectively bypasses the real issue. Certainly there are difficulties associated with observational data representing sporadic events of short duration. These, being usually recorded by ordinary people, are seen by scientists as lacking objectivity. In fact we need to take a wider view—such data are statements of an empirical nature and are therefore amenable to scientific enquiry. The real problem is that, whereas causal relationships may be confirmed by experiment or measurement, it appears impossible to verify fleeting, unforeseen events like the sighting of an unknown animal. There is, however, a solution to this problem. Records of such events can be subjected to a test of correlation. In other words, an account is made more probable to the extent that it is confirmed by an independent source. Such a process may (like much scientific endeavour) be messy and fraught with uncertainty but it presents us with the only method of empirical enquiry suitable to the case in hand. And it is essentially an historical process.[3] This paper is an attempt to show how this method might have been applied on the two known occasions when the yahoo came under scientific scrutiny.

An anonymous account of 1842 notes that there had then long been argument among Australian naturalists as to whether or not such an animal as the yahoo

existed.[4] However, the first documented occasion on which the question of the yahoo was subject to scientific enquiry took the form of a dispute between the journalist and field naturalist Henry J. McCooey (c.1852–1902) and the then curator of the Australian Museum, Edward Pierson Ramsay. McCooey, who worked as a collector for the museum, is nowadays forgotten except by herpetologists. Indeed, no historian of Australian science has as much as mentioned him and any assessment of his significance awaits further study.[5] However, in the 1890s his name was a household word, or so we might infer from a character in Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* (1899) who is described as 'a born naturalist—a perfect McCooey in his way'.[6]

In December 1882 an article by McCooey under the caption 'Australian Apes' appeared in 'The Naturalist' column of the *Town and Country Journal*, apparently the first of the many contributions he was to make to this popular weekly. McCooey began by referring to occasional reports in the press of 'strange animals of the monkey tribe', reports which seemed to attract little or no attention. Indeed the general opinion among Australian naturalists, he told his readers, was that the nearest approach to monkeys to be found in Australia was the koala. 'Now I am in a position to state', he continued, 'and if necessary to prove, that a more egregious and unpardonable error does not exist'. As he rightly pointed out, the fact that no one had yet collected an 'ape' did not justify the conclusion that there were none to be found. After all, it was extremely improbable that one would be foolhardy enough to present itself at the Australian Museum to undergo the somewhat delicate operation of stuffing—this no doubt meant as a rebuke to those critics (including Ramsay) who might rebuff or already had rebuffed him on this issue. McCooey concluded that there was nothing to suggest that an 'ape' could not live in the colony, while there was abundant evidence to show that they did.

McCooey next presented what purported to be his own observation. A few days previously, he announced, he had seen one of these animals in an unfrequented locality on the coast between Batemans Bay and Ulladulla. The animal was standing partly upright and distant from him less than a chain (i.e. less than about twenty metres). He went on:

> I should think that if it were standing perfectly upright it would be nearly 5ft high. It was tailless and covered with very long black hair, which was of a dirty red or snuff-colour about the throat and breast. Its eyes, which were small and restless, were partly hidden by matted hair that covered its head. The length of the fore legs or arms seemed to be strikingly out of proportion with the rest of its body, but in all other respects its build seemed to be fairly proportional. It would probably weigh about 8st. On the whole it was a most uncouth and repulsive looking creature, evidently possessed of prodigious strength, and one which I should not care to come to close quarters with.[7]

McCooey did not claim to be the first to have seen such an animal—he could nominate half a dozen men at Batemans Bay who had seen the same or a similar one. He did, however, think he was the first to admit in a newspaper to having seen it (in

fact he was not, as we shall see). McCooey also mentioned that a search party had been organised at Batemans Bay some months earlier in order to capture or kill the supposed ape, but the idea had been abandoned for fear of a shooting accident. Finally, he reported that 'the skeleton of an ape, 4ft in length, may be seen at any time in a cave 14 miles from Bateman's Bay, in the direction of Ulladulla'.

The central issue here, of course, is McCooey's reported confrontation with the 'Australian ape'. Did he really see the animal he described? While we cannot be sure, McCooey's account is confirmed by a similar event that had been reported eleven years earlier in the *Illawarra Mercury* (Wollongong) and which provides the only other detailed report of the creature's colour. According to this account, one evening in April 1871 a certain George Osborne, a census collector of Dapto, had been descending a nearby mountain range on horseback when he noticed what he thought to be a gorilla coming down a tree. Osborne described the animal as being about five feet in height, of slender build with long muscular arms, while the body was 'covered with black hair, with a tan-coloured streak from the neck to the abdomen'.[8]

The two descriptions are generally in agreement with the most striking similarity apparent in the colour, where Osborne's observation is perfectly matched by McCooey's remark that the 'ape' was black with a dirty red or snuff colour about the throat or breast. If the observations were independent, this close correlation would provide strong support for McCooey's description. Was McCooey aware of the earlier account by Osborne? It is unlikely that McCooey or anyone else then living at Batemans Bay would have known of an obscure report published elsewhere many years earlier. And two points in particular bear this out. First, McCooey claimed he was the first to publish such an account, and it is hard to see that he could have made such a statement if Osborne's report was well known. Next, while McCooey admitted that he had occasionally seen certain unspecified reports about such animals in the press, and he later learned about other specific cases, he never mentioned Osborne's story even though it would have been to his advantage to have done so had he covertly based his own story on it. We should therefore accept the independence of McCooey's account and concede that the Osborne/McCooey correlation provides evidence for the existence of the animal described.

A secondary issue is the location of McCooey's cave and the skeleton which, if found, could have established the creature's existence beyond doubt. Where was the cave and why, if the skeleton could be seen so easily, did McCooey not collect it? The answer may be that he did not actually see the cave. Perhaps he was told about it by someone whose word he respected, set out to find it but failed to do so although remaining convinced of its existence. In any event it would be wrong simply to assume that McCooey fabricated the story.[9]

Not long after the event he described (perhaps even before his report appeared) McCooey returned to Sydney to tell Ramsay the news, because it was also in December that Ramsay offered McCooey a bonus of £100 if he brought him a specimen alive or dead.[10] This offer alone would have been an enormous incentive to continue his search, and McCooey might have spent as much time in the following

months as his circumstances would permit absorbed in this quest. However, in March 1883 Ramsay left for London on a year's leave and his place was temporarily filled by William Haswell. Unlike Ramsay, Haswell had little direct knowledge of Australia (he had arrived here in 1878) but came possessed of impressive academic credentials. In 1882 Haswell had been appointed as demonstrator at the University of Sydney, where he afterwards became the first Professor of Biology (later Zoology). Whether or not McCooey had heard of Haswell's appointment, he might well have felt the need to take the matter further in Ramsay's absence. In any case, he wrote to the Museum from Orange on 24 July 1883, addressing his letter not to Haswell but to the Museum's trustees. McCooey enclosed a copy of his article, explaining that since it had appeared he had gained much information on the subject. Furthermore, he told the trustees, he shortly intended to deal with the matter in the Sydney press, at which time he thought he would be able to convince the most sceptical naturalist that there were 'indigenous apes' in New South Wales.[11]

Before considering the Museum's reply, we might ask what McCooey meant by the expressions 'Australian ape' or 'indigenous ape'. To answer this question we must look ahead to two articles that McCooey wrote for the *Town and Country Journal* in October 1883.[12] In the first of these McCooey referred readers to the description in his December 1882 article of 'a large ape, (or yahoo, as the animal is called by bushmen)'. He went on to say that the article in question had attracted no comment; perhaps, he added disingenuously, the presence of 'indigenous apes' was so notorious as to be unremarkable. 'But strange to say, Mr Ramsay, curator of the Australian Museum, disbelieves in their presence'. Ramsay's scepticism arose, McCooey explained, not because it was impossible for 'apes' to exist without being captured, but because of the absence of suitable food plants (mainly fruit) for them to eat. Against this view, McCooey explained in the second article, it was quite probable that the 'Australian ape' existed upon food quite different from that which sustained the anthropoid apes of other countries. 'For my own part', he wrote, 'I am strongly inclined to believe that the Australian ape is carnivorous, and that it subsists on birds' eggs, mice etc'. If not carnivorous, it might well be that the creature subsisted upon leaves and herbs. But, he continued, there was not a scrap of evidence that fruit was a necessary part of the creature's diet.

The question of what such an animal might eat is important because McCooey's remarks on this point give us an insight into what he considered the creature to be. McCooey was no taxonomist, but his discussion of food had led him to reflect that most Australian animals differed widely from animals in other parts of the world. Would it not therefore be reasonable to assume that the 'Australian ape' should differ from those of Africa or Asia? He concluded that it was 'more than probable that the Australian ape differs as widely from the African as the kangaroo does from the buffalo, the dingo from the lion, or the laughing jackass from the nightingale'. In other words, despite the name and taking into account McCooey's imperfect grasp of zoological categories, the 'Australian ape' was some as yet undiscovered marsupial, an animal both unlike and distinct from the anthropoid apes elsewhere.

Meanwhile, in response to McCooey's letter of 24 July, Haswell merely thanked McCooey on behalf of the trustees 'for your interesting communication and the enclosed newspaper paragraph regarding the existence of Apes in New South Wales'.[13] Haswell's letter appears to be a polite acknowledgment, but is in fact much more. To begin with, Umberto Eco has reminded us that when faced with an unknown phenomenon we often seek to identify it with something already present in our mind—a view he traces back to Kant's introduction of the *schema* as a condition of sensibility.[14] Eco discusses the platypus, but also cites two other cases that are perhaps more instructive for our purpose. The first concerns Marco Polo and what we now know to be the rhinoceros. Polo had never seen a rhinoceros but already possessed the notion of the unicorn. He therefore decided that the rhinoceros must be that fabulous beast, although a strange example of the species in being large and black rather than slender and white. Eco also speculates on what Montezuma might have made of reports about the conquistadors' horses, which the Aztecs described to him as large deer. Eco is here concerned with the relation between perception and naming, and therefore with the ability of someone to grasp another's ideas.

Of course McCooey's case differs from the two examples given above in that we are already familiar with a rhinoceros and a horse, and do not have to rely on words to tell us what they look like. It is therefore all too easy to underestimate the complexity of Haswell's unwitting predicament. McCooey may have thought that the concept of an ape best fitted the animal he saw (just as Osborne had described his animal as a gorilla), although he qualified it with the word 'Australian' and later strove to explain that it differed from the true apes. On the other hand Haswell had not seen the animal and would have known next to nothing about the controversy over the yahoo. The word 'ape' therefore had for him its usual zoological meaning. Haswell would also have known that there were no primates other than man in Australia.

The result of all this was doubly unfortunate. In his inability to match McCooey's words to the appropriate perception Haswell failed to understand—indeed could not have understood—the message McCooey sought to convey. Instead Haswell would have dismissed the matter out of hand on zoogeographical grounds alone. Yet a rejection of McCooey's claim on the grounds that there could be no apes in Australia would have been as illogical as, say, a denial, by one who knew nothing of the thylacine (Tasmanian tiger), that such an animal could exist because there were no tigers in Tasmania.

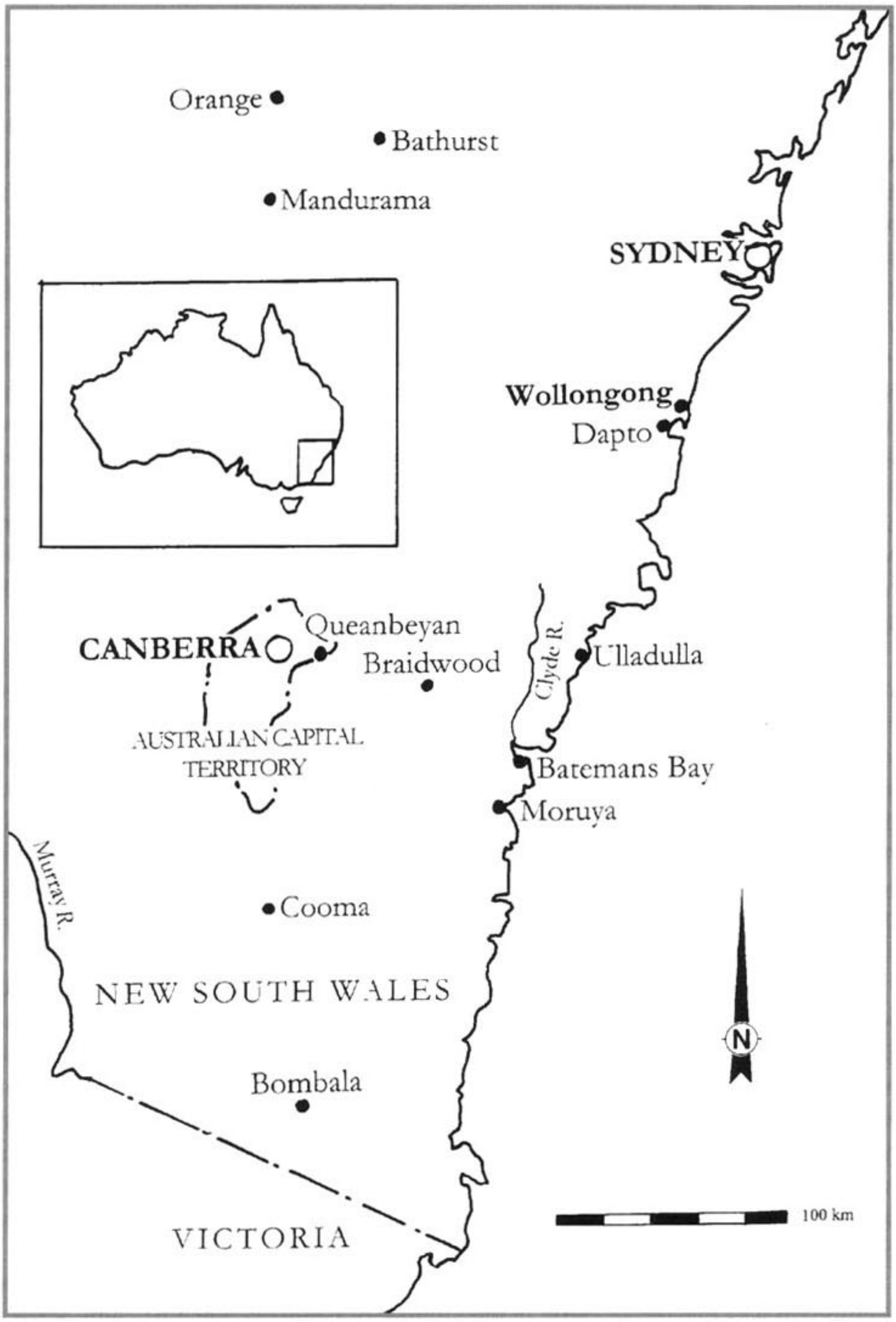
The 'ape' aside, Haswell might also have been heedless of McCooey for a different reason. Finney has pointed out that the latter part of the nineteenth century saw a breach between natural history and the new biology. The emphasis was now on process rather than objects. Haswell's words to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1891, with which he condemned 'The naturalist of the old school ... accumulating his descriptions of species and his records of remarkable and interesting facts ...', might well have been written with both Ramsay and McCooey in mind.[15]

Whether stung by Haswell's dismissive tone or encouraged by his expression of interest, McCooey wrote again to the Museum on 27 July from a survey camp at Mandurama, some little way to the south west of Bathurst. His letter, which reported on information received since his first article had been written, was directed to Haswell himself. This time Haswell did not reply. Instead he must have put the letter aside for Ramsay to deal with on return because it later found its way, unregistered and unanswered, into a bundle of Ramsay's letters.[16] Then in mid-October McCooey wrote again to Haswell from Mandurama enclosing a newspaper cutting about a strange animal like an ape that had been frightening residents on the road between Orange and Bathurst.[17] Once again Haswell did not reply. However, a report of the creature so close to where he was working must have renewed McCooey's enthusiasm in the matter. Over fourteen days in the latter part of October McCooey wrote the two articles referred to above, as well as a further and final letter to the Museum.[18] This last was addressed to the trustees and put before them an interesting proposal. If they would place the sum of £40, the least that would compensate for his time and cover expenses, in the hands of a well known firm of Sydney solicitors, he would try to capture an 'indigenous ape'. If successful, he would hand it over to the Museum. McCooey added that he was confident of success and could provide the names of four respectable men in the Mandurama district who could prove the presence of the animals by affidavits.

On the face of it the trustees could not object to a proposal that might deliver them such a prize for so small a sum. But, apart from scepticism or caution, two considerations might have deterred them. The first was Haswell's evident indifference towards McCooey. The second was a handicap which McCooey had placed upon himself—he had rashly concluded his letter by telling the trustees that if they declined his offer and he did capture the animal, it would never enter the doors of the Australian Museum. Whatever the reason, someone was not impressed. McCooey received a letter from the museum's secretary, Sutherland Sinclair, informing him that the trustees had decided not to accept his proposal.[19] So ended McCooey's known attempts to interest the zoological world in his 'ape'.[20]

The only other known occasion on which the yahoo came under scientific scrutiny took place in 1912 following an announcement by the poet and cattle farmer Sydney Wheeler Jephcott (1864–1951) that he had found some unusual prints in the mud of a small creek on or near his property Creewah near Bombala in the southern Monaro district of New South Wales. There are essentially two contemporary reports of this incident, one short account published in the *Bombala Times* based on an interview with Jephcott's neighbour, George Summerell of nearby Thoko,[21] and another, longer account five days later in the *Sydney Morning Herald* containing excerpts from two letters written by Jephcott himself.[22]

According to the account in the *Bombala Times*, on Sunday 13 October Summerell was mustering cattle in the vicinity of Creewah when he came across a strange animal drinking at a waterhole. Summerell told Jephcott, who proceeded to the waterhole where he observed distinct tracks. In the more expansive account in the



Map of section of south-eastern Australia showing places mentioned in the text.

Herald, Jephcott had about ten days earlier noticed scratches on a tree trunk such as might have been made by three fingers and a thumb of a hand with abnormally strong and large nails. Then, on the Sunday, he was informed by Summerell that the latter had that day seen a strange animal drinking on all fours at a small creek. On Monday morning Jephcott rode up to the scene and found about a score of both footprints and handprints. According to Jephcott, the handprints 'differed from a large human hand chiefly in having the little fingers set much like the thumbs' (a formation which he thought explained the scratches on the tree), while the footprints resembled those of an enormously long and ugly human foot with only four long toes.

On Wednesday Jephcott was at last able to take three plaster casts, one of a foot in hard mud, another in soft mud, and a third of a hand superimposed on the front part of the corresponding foot where the animal had been drinking. Throughout the following Saturday night and Sunday morning a stream of people (including, it seems, the four year old Frank Allen, of whom more below) passed through the hotel in Bombala where Jephcott was staying to view the casts.[23] These were then dispatched to Edgeworth David, Professor of Geology at the University of Sydney and by then famous for his exploits in Antarctica. In his letter to David, Jephcott wrote that he had taken care on his first visit to observe any indication of human agency but could perceive none. Furthermore, the character of many of the persons who claimed to have seen such an animal during a period of at least thirty years precluded a hoax.

What did David make of the casts? According to the *Herald*, David agreed (but did not remark upon the fact) that only four toes were represented in the footprints. He then added that 'In reference to what Mr Jephcott terms the hand-prints, all I can say is that they certainly closely resemble the prints of a large human hand, as he suggests'. To another reporter David was more explicit:

> 'The imprints are very human in shape', the Professor told an 'Evening News' reporter this morning as he scrutinised them. 'It looks to me as though a man's foot has been put down, and then a hand added, the ball of the hand just obliterating the toes'.[24]

Confirmation of what David had said came from William Rowan Browne, who was then David's demonstrator and who afterwards became Reader in Geology. Nearly sixty years later Browne recalled that after David had studied the cast he suggested someone had superimposed a hand on the imprint of a human foot, obliterating the toes and the ball of the foot. Browne wrote that David was always getting all sorts of things to identify and difficult questions to answer. Browne could not remember seeing a copy of a reply to Jephcott among David's papers, and believed the casts themselves were probably thrown out while David was away at the war. Browne's sketch of the cast in question shows a long foot with five long digits.[25]

Was it a human hand (as David implied) or something hitherto unsuspected by science (as Jephcott believed)? To opt for either is to miss the point that in an

important sense it was both—the unknown seen in terms of the known. To understand this we should recall Eco's suggestion that first impressions of novelty are nothing until the mind wraps them in predicates.

In this case Jephcott recognised that the fore foot resembled a large human hand but was at pains to bring out the difference (he mentioned only the position of the fifth digit but must also have had in mind long nails—a feature which may or may not have been apparent from the cast). For his part, David did not possess the notion of the yahoo and would have had no better concept in which to clothe his sensations than that provided by Jephcott's image of the human hand. David had nothing to say about the other casts precisely because they were incidental to the notion he brought to the matter. It was as though a long foot with four long toes was incomprehensible and could therefore be easily ignored, but a palm with five digits superimposed on such a foot might have a simple explanation. David could say, using the image given him by Jephcott, that it looked like a human hand (no matter that the fifth digit was set in an unusual manner) placed over a human foot so as to obliterate the toes (no need to emphasise that the other casts showed only four of these).

Apart from this, the two principal ideas involved (the human hand and superposition) had such powerful associations (human intervention and alteration/erasure) that it was almost inevitable that the episode would involve charges of fakery. In any event, David concluded that an actual human hand was responsible.

But one observation at least suggested that David was wrong. Certainly there had long been evidence for the presence of something new and different. This included, but was not limited to, the Osborne/McCooey correlation and the episode involving Arthur Marrin and the animal he killed near Braidwood in October 1893.[26] Any serious study of the material available ought to have suggested the need for further enquiry. And there did exist, in the very place we might expect to find it, an obscurely worded precedent which provided independent support for the aptness of Jephcott's description and the relevance of the casts. The creature killed by Marrin nearly twenty years earlier had been described in unusual detail by one who had examined the body. Restoration of the text shows that among other features it possessed fore feet 'shaped like a man's hands with the palm precisely similar and toes which had a close resemblance to fingers with overgrown nails'.[27] In other words, the only other detailed reference in the literature to the yahoo's fore feet neatly confirmed both the possibility of a conceptual link with the human hand *and* Jephcott's description of the handprints.[28] Furthermore, information from various sources supported Jephcott's description of the hind foot as being long with long toes although, unlike his account, earlier reports did not specify the number of these toes.[29]

Had the Braidwood precedent and other such instances been known and understood in scientific circles Jephcott's claims might have received the consideration they deserved. Indeed it might have been better had Jephcott approached Haswell, then Professor of Biology at Sydney, who could have recalled his correspondence with McCooey on this subject thirty years earlier. Be that as it may, David knew

nothing of these matters and the consequences were disastrous. Apart from the public humiliation of Jephcott, David's dismissal of the casts (flawed as it was) ended serious debate on the matter before it had properly begun—in particular David's pronouncement probably ensured that Harper's subsequent revelations about the 'Australian gorilla' (referred to below) were marginalised even before they appeared in print. Furthermore, the claims to which Jephcott had referred were never investigated and the casts themselves (the only material evidence) were lost or destroyed.

Meanwhile, opinion in the Bombala district seemed to support the view that the prints had been fabricated. Frank Allen, who was born at Bibbenluke near Bombala and later compiled a history of the southern Monaro,[30] wrote of the casts: 'I can remember seeing them as a child'. He continued:

> There was little doubt among the locals as to what the prints were and the object in making them. It was generally believed that one particular family were duffing Jephcott's cattle on parts of the run far from the homestead.
>
> Jephcott it seemed was showing too much interest in this part of his property and the hoax was arranged to frighten him away.[31]

Allen's own sketch also showed a long foot with five long digits. He concluded that, from what he knew of the reputation of the family concerned (which family this was he did not say) and from his knowledge of the prints, that was the explanation for the 'Creewah Hairy Man'. According to this view, Summerell or someone known to him had both fabricated the prints and concocted the story about the strange animal seen drinking at the creek—although why Summerell (assuming he was involved in the cattle stealing) should then draw attention to himself by talking to the *Bombala Times* remains unclear. David's opinion, which was reported in the *Times* on 25 October, must have added fuel to (if indeed it did not ignite) speculation that the whole thing was a hoax.

On the surface, the hoax theory provides a satisfactory explanation of events because in fact Jephcott's cattle *were* stolen around that time. Jephcott's biographer, probably drawing on information provided by his family, wrote that Jephcott returned from Creewah to his home at Ournie on the Upper Murray in 1914 following the theft of all his cattle.[32] Nevertheless, Allen's theory—the belief that the prints were made to frighten Jephcott away from that part of his property where the cattle duffers were operating—has little in its favour. The production of spurious prints at the spot in question would have achieved nothing for the cattle duffers because, whatever Jephcott's reaction to them, they would inevitably have brought him to the scene of the illicit operations, with all the unwanted attention that involved. Furthermore Jephcott, who had spent all his life in the bush, would almost certainly have seen through a hoax. If the thieves had really wished to discourage Jephcott, their best plan would have been to lie low or create a diversion. Allen's theory therefore contained a contradiction and depends for its credibility on a certain vagueness as to what had actually happened. In this regard it helps to remember that

its proponents were probably aware only of the brief report in the *Bombala Times*, which mentioned tracks but nothing of Jephcott's detailed observations. (Allen was explicit about his reliance on the *Times*, and it is quite possible that he had not read the account in the *Herald*.)

The conclusion forced upon us is that the cattle duffing and the creation of prints were essentially separate events, that Summerell was not involved in making the prints and that these could have been produced by some unknown animal (though here the circumstances were not necessarily as described by Summerell). In brief, the footprints are the key here rather than Summerell's description.

The belief that an unknown animal was responsible was shared by one R. W. Dawson of Goulburn, who five years earlier had made some observations near the same spot.[33] However, the main response to Jephcott's announcement, and one of the most baffling documents in an enigmatic literature, appeared in the Sydney *Sun* and purported to come from a certain Charles Harper, a licensed surveyor from the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt.[34]

Harper very likely had not read Jephcott's account; he certainly confused the parts played by Jephcott and Dawson, although he knew of David's opinion that the prints were a hoax and conceded (albeit for an inadequate reason) that this was a possibility. But whatever his understanding of recent events, Harper's message was an extraordinary one—that for many years rumours of an 'Australian gorilla' or some such animal had come from the mountains of the coastal range in southern New South Wales, between the head of the Clyde River and the Victorian border. According to Harper, this very rare animal never left the deep gorges and dense jungles of the eastern slopes. Over a very long period he had met reliable men who had seen this animal in the jungle at short distances, and who were so terrified at the experience that they fled leaving their work as timber getters and tools behind them. While scientists denied its existence, the older generation of Aborigines maintained the contrary.

This was not all. At the risk of taxing the credulity of his readers, Harper then went on to offer his own tale of an encounter with the creature, which took place when he and two companions undertook a trip into these jungles accompanied by two large kangaroo dogs. On the evening of the second day, having just turned in, they heard a strange noise, which utterly demoralised the dogs. One of the men threw kindling onto the fire, which soon flickered into a blaze. In the light of the fire a huge man-like animal stood erect, grimacing and beating its breast, before eventually moving off on all fours into the scrub. The difficulty is that certain aspects of this lurid scene—the apparent confusion over whether they were sleeping in huts or tents, the dogs which could throw a wild bull with ease but were cowed by the apparition (why take such dogs on a trip when no firearms were carried and therefore no hunting was involved?), the thumping of its chest with its paws in a manner reminiscent of the gorilla, the horrible mouth with two large and long canines, the companion who fainted and remained unconscious for some hours—seem to invite our disbelief. And dwelling on the appearance of the animal at length (the description contains nearly

300 words) appears at odds with Harper's statement that he intended to describe the animal 'as briefly as possible'.

Perhaps as a result of these anomalies, Harper's account has usually been dismissed out of hand. Groves considers that the story's claims are excessive ('over-the-top'), but this judgement has not been accompanied by any critical analysis of the text or the context in which it was written.[35]

In fact much of the information in the first part of the text can be corroborated. From references to Harper in records of births, deaths and marriages, electoral rolls and government Blue Books we learn that he was born in Cuba in about 1840 but subsequently came to Australia and was appointed a licensed surveyor in 1862. He spent all his working life of some fifty years on or near the South Coast, first at Bombala and then at Moruya.[36] In the course of his work Harper must often have ventured into the jungles of the eastern escarpment in the way described for the *Sun*. Indeed one such instance was recorded early in 1912 when Harper and a friend, having become lost amid gullies and ravines while pegging out land for a coal mine syndicate, had to camp out all night as best they could.[37] Towards the end of the same year, Harper left Moruya for Leichhardt, where he continued to live until about 1915 (he died at Bega in 1930).

Other features of Harper's preamble that can be confirmed are his claim that the animal had long been known on the coastal slopes of southern New South Wales and his remark that the older generation of Aborigines were aware of such a creature. In support of the first, there exists Osborne's description of the animal seen in 1871 near Dapto and McCooey's record of the animal he observed in 1882 near Batemans Bay (although both these were outside the area designated by Harper). As for the second, we should not expect that any perception of such an animal by the Aborigines would be recorded in easily recognisable form. However, a few scattered remarks by anthropologists and others, together with the most recent study of what has remained of the South Coast languages, allow the conclusion that the Dhurga and Dharawal word *dulugal* may in part be identified with the white concept of the 'Australian gorilla'.

We might digress here to consider this identification in more detail. We have already seen that the names used for the creature by Europeans—most clearly 'yahoo', 'ape' and 'gorilla'—were taken from familiar forms, and also why this had to be so. (Oddly enough, 'yahoo' was also borrowed in turn by the Aborigines, so that it appeared to some to be an Aboriginal word. Presumably those, like the Australian National Dictionary Centre, who nowadays take this view have overlooked the facts that other terms associated with the yahoo—'devil-devil' and 'evil spirit'—are actually European cultural impositions and that the word itself has a well documented provenance in English.)[38] However, the unknown creature referred to bore only a general and indeterminate resemblance to the animals from which the names were borrowed. On the other hand *dulugal* is an authentic Aboriginal word, and this presents difficulties of its own. In the first place very little of the languages concerned has survived. Secondly, information from Aborigines is seen largely through white

eyes. Thirdly, different languages may categorise the world in different ways, so that it is not always possible to match a word in one language with that in another.

These considerations alone would render doubtful the suggestion by Diana Kelloway Eades, author of the standard work on the surviving fragments of Dhurga and Dharawal, that *dulugal* be translated as 'gorilla-like legendary creature'.[39] Actually this conclusion is the consequence of a methodological error—Eades' analysis of meaning takes into consideration word lists compiled by linguists but excludes isolated examples, by linguists and others, found scattered throughout the relevant literature. In fact *none* of the written references to *dulugal* is actually taken into account by Eades in determining the meaning of this word. When an analysis of all available sources for *dulugal* is made, it becomes clear that the word has no exact equivalent in English. Rather, *dulugal* represents an otherwise undefined category into which fall the concept of ghost and other spirit beings, but which also seems to include the rarely seen man-like entity referred to as the 'Australian gorilla'.[40] Such overlapping categories would be a cause of misunderstanding to Europeans and to Aborigines alike. This confusion is well illustrated by an exchange between the linguist Janet Mathews and her Dhurga informant Percy Mumbulla who, when asked why the *dulugal* was like a gorilla, replied: 'He is the gorilla type but we call him in our ... *dulugal*, see'.[41] But of course we do not and cannot see. Harper would have encountered this problem, but had the advantage that the older Aborigines of his day still spoke their own language. He would therefore have been able to find an alternative way of establishing meaning, perhaps through detailed description. Nevertheless, language was and remains a potent source of misconception in such a context.

Returning to Harper's account of the 'gorilla', for the reasons given above it is possible to accept that much of the first part has some credibility. But how can we then account for what is contradictory or implausible in his tale of the encounter with the 'gorilla'? In fact the solution may well lie in the nature of the medium in which his recollections were published. The *Sun,* which had first appeared only two years earlier, has been seen as the beginning of modern, popular journalism. It was run by men who knew how to attract readers and the paper's soaring circulation in its early years attested to their success.[42] Given the sanction provided by David, one can readily conceive that the *Sun* should use its editorial discretion to embellish or supplement Harper's own words. Indeed, the temptation to heighten the dramatic possibilities in the story must have been irresistible. And there is in fact stylistic evidence to suggest the presence of another hand in the text.

To illustrate this we must imagine a line drawn after the fourth sentence of the sixth paragraph, which concludes with the words 'a low, rumbling growl'. In so doing we divide the text almost exactly in half (531 words as against 537). The first half contains the background information about the creature (and presages its appearance), while the second half, which contains most of the controversial passages, describes its manifestation before Harper and his friends. However, while the two sections are of roughly equal length, there are just over twice as many sentences in the second half as in the first. In other words, sentences in the first half

are on average twice the length of sentences in the second half. This marked variation represents additional evidence that much of the second half is suspect. The final two sentences, with the exception of those few words in the last sentence but one which mention the thumping of the chest, should probably be regarded as genuine. Overall, we must conclude that Harper's central contention has substance, but that his original account has been altered to an indeterminate extent and that this treatment was of a kind with, and followed from, David's rejection of the casts.

In seeking to disparage Harper's claims a contemporary critic, Alex E. Montgomery, wrote that science was simply a question of evidence—probably meaning material evidence and suggesting that Harper had none.[43] In fact evidence may take many forms and requires both recognition and interpretation. In the case of the yahoo we should expect that evidence would be drawn almost exclusively from written accounts of the phenomenon, and so indeed it is. Nevertheless, as Ramsay's approach illustrates, the issue has been clouded by a demand that only a body (that is, the animal itself) will meet the standards demanded by true scientific rigour.[44] The absurdity of this demand becomes clear when we consider its logical equivalent, that no evidence at all is acceptable (evidence, however defined, is necessarily less than the thing itself). The primary aim of the scientist in this context should be not to demand the animal itself, or even material evidence for its existence but rather to identify and interpret whatever evidence may be available. This process includes confirmation of observational data. Unfortunately, whatever the reason, evidence of every kind for the yahoo in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was overlooked, misunderstood or ignored by the scientists of the day. At the same time, far from being merely a question of evidence, actual zoological discovery in Australia—as the cases of the platypus' eggs, marsupial reproduction and the Queensland lungfish show—was a convoluted and protracted process characterised by the dominance of preconceived ideas over observations and beset by complexities and uncertainties. Few of the scientists involved had actually ventured into the field, while the views of local inhabitants, who might lack expertise but were in the best position to observe what took place, often either went unheard or were dismissed out of hand.[45] So was it with the yahoo. This paper shows how this occurred and suggests that an alternative methodology, less rigid but no less rigorous than that traditionally employed, could have led to a different outcome and can today at least allow us to appreciate the range and complexity of the issues involved.

Waramanga ACT

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 The problem was first defined in Graham C. Joyner, 'Notes on the Hairy Man, Wild Man or Yahoo', 1973, MS 3889, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra. Documents identified there were subsequently reproduced in Joyner, *The Hairy Man of South Eastern Australia*, Canberra, 1977. For the debate see *Cryptozoology* between 1984 and 1998. The debate was, however, marked by the confusion of the yahoo with the supposed yowie, notably by Colin Groves, 'The Yahoo, the Yowie and Reports of Australian Hairy Bipeds', *Cryptozoology*, vol. 5, 1986, pp. 47–54. Groves here wrongly identified 'yowie' as a better known name for the yahoo and later adopted the term 'yowie/yahoo'—see his 'On Type I and Type II Errors in Cryptozoology, or, Was Proteus a Yahoo?' [Response to Joyner and Greenwell], *Cryptozoology*, vol. 7, 1988, pp. 123–8. But Groves was not alone—this misconception has been widely held from the outset. In fact the familiar concept of the yowie arose only quite recently from a dubious conjunction of two unrelated factors. The first was a review in the Sydney *Sun-Herald* of John Napier's book *Bigfoot: The Yeti and Sasquatch in Myth and Reality*, London, 1972, which in turn prompted fanciful speculation that such a creature was known to Aborigines in western and central Australia. See the letter from Rex Gilroy in the *Sun-Herald,* 11 February 1973, p. 74, which, significantly enough, makes no mention of the yowie. A second factor was the relatively late appearance of 'yowie' as a diminutive of 'yahoo'. See P. J. Gresser, 'Manuscripts relating principally to Aborigines of the Bathurst District', 1964, MS 21/2, pp. 167–71, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra. (The suggestion by the Australian National Dictionary Centre that 'yowie' is derived from the Yuwaalaraay word *yuwi*, or dream spirit, is baseless.) The outcome—the novel notion of the yowie as some enormous Australian primate—first emerged during an interview with Gilroy on 5 May 1975 on the ABC's radio program 'AM'. Then, on 7 May, a report appeared in the Sydney *Daily Mirror* and the legend of the yowie was born. For the next seven years or so the matter was seldom out of the public eye for long. In short, the yowie of popular imagination takes its name from the yahoo but is really a product of the late twentieth century and is quite distinct from the yahoo (although some yowie material may reflect authentic traditions about the yahoo). Conversely, documentation for a study of the yahoo was established prior to the introduction of the yowie and was not intended to provide, nor does it provide, support for the yowie cause.

2 Joyner, 'The orang-utan in England: an explanation for the use of *yahoo* as a name for the Australian hairy man', *Cryptozoology*, vol. 3, 1984, pp. 55–57, and 'The meaning of *yahoo* and *dulugal*: European and Aboriginal perspectives of the so-called "Australian gorilla"', *Canberra Historical Journal*, vol. 33, March 1994, pp. 27–34.

3 A great deal has been written about matching characteristics of the yahoo. One of the most persistent criticisms has been the contention that historical material about the yahoo is little more than a mass of disordered and inconsistent data. But the correspondences noted in this paper and elsewhere belie this claim. It is true that the variety and frequent obscurity of the texts make any comparative analysis difficult. However, if we leave aside material like the brief description by Summerell and the account attributed to Harper (both of which, as noted elsewhere in this paper, present peculiar problems), as well as records of a mythological nature, then the reports will be found to contain some significant agreement but practically no contradiction. It would be unrealistic to expect more.

4 'Superstitions of the Australian Aborigines: The Yahoo', *Australian and New Zealand Monthly Magazine*, 1842, pp. 92–96. See also Joyner, *Hairy Man*, pp. 4–5.

5 Ronald Strahan et al., *Rare and Curious Specimens: An Illustrated History of the Australian Museum 1827–1979*, Sydney, 1979, makes use of museum records but concentrates on administration. Ann Moyal, *'a bright & savage land': Scientists in colonial Australia*, Sydney, 1986, offers a broad survey of the work of established scientists. Colin Finney, *Paradise*

Revealed: Natural History in nineteenth-century Australia, Melbourne, 1993, has an emphasis on scientific societies and Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors; The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, Melbourne, 1996, is largely concerned with Victoria.

6 Steele Rudd, *On Our Selection*, Melbourne, 1987, p. 66.

7 *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 9 December 1882, p. 1127. This and related documents are reproduced in Joyner, 'H. J. McCooey, the Australian Museum and the "Indigenous Ape"', 1986, series 147; H. J. McCooey Papers, 1894–1986, Australian Museum (AM), Sydney.

8 From the *Illawarra Mercury*, 14 April 1871, but see Joyner, *Hairy Man*, pp. 1–2, which also contains a reference to the *Empire*, 17 April 1871, p. 2.

9 McCooey reported that he had observed the strange animal in a rugged mountainous locality on the coast between Ulladulla and Batemans Bay. At that time travel by road between the two towns was hazardous and uncomfortable. There appears to have been two lines of communication. One (that used by coaches) ran inland along the alignment of what is now the Princes Highway, except for a deviation that followed the top of the Cockwhy range. Another, a mere track, largely followed the line of the coast. It seems that McCooey must have taken the coastal route and that the mountains he referred to were part of the Murramarang range. But, apart from its being distant fourteen miles from Batemans Bay, it is unclear where the cave might be. Indeed it seems there are few if any caves in the area because the geological character of the region is not conducive to the formation of caves. Of course it is possible that McCooey's cave was not a real cave at all but merely a rock overhang.

10 *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 20 October 1883, p. 747.

11 McCooey to the trustees, 24 July 1883, series 8, Letters Received, 1883–1888, 231/1883, AM, Sydney.

12 *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 20 October 1883, p. 747, and 3 November 1883, p. 839.

13 W. A. Haswell to McCooey, 25 July 1883, series 49, Curators' Private Letter Books, 1875–1911, vol. 2, p. 241, AM, Sydney.

14 Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, London, 2000, pp. 57–98, 127–9 and 285–7.

15 Finney, pp. 131–3.

16 McCooey to Haswell, 27 July 1883, E.P. Ramsay papers, MSS 2169, Letters received on scientific subjects, 1865–1898, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

17 McCooey to Haswell, 13 October 1883, series 8, Letters Received, 1883–1888, 301/1883, AM, Sydney.

18 McCooey to the trustees, 29 October 1883, series 8, Letters Received, 1883–1888, 310/1883, AM, Sydney.

19 S. Sinclair to McCooey, 8 November 1883, series 6, Outward Letter Books, 1837–1923, vol. 8, p. 251, AM, Sydney.

20 For the only other discussion of this affair see Robert Holden and Nicholas Holden, *Bunyips: Australia's folklore of fear*, Canberra, 2001, pp. 69–79. The authors, whose subject is the bizarre in Australian literature, find it hard to avoid the conclusion that the episode represents a confrontation between a determined scientific community and an eccentric with a grudge against the Australian Museum. Such a partisan view, which may represent opinion within the present day museum, overlooks both the merits of McCooey's case and his understandable annoyance at being ignored by the museum authorities.

21 *Bombala Times*, 18 October 1912, p. 6.

22 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 October 1912, p. 4. See also Joyner, *Hairy Man*, pp. 14–17.

23 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 October 1912, p. 10.

24 *Evening News*, 23 October 1912, p. 8.

25 W. R. Browne to Joyner, 20 October 1971, in the recipient's possession.

26 For a discussion of this episode see Joyner, 'History as empirical enquiry: The Marrin animal and other evidence for the yahoo at Braidwood in the nineteenth century', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* vol. 82, no. 2, 1996, pp. 168–79.
27 *Braidwood Dispatch*, 28 October 1893, p. 2. See also Joyner, *Hairy Man*, p. 8. Note that the emendation 'fore' for 'four' in the *Dispatch's* account is clearly preferable. For this see Joyner, 'History as empirical enquiry', p. 170.
28 The Marrin animal's front feet are also described as 'great paws'. In addition the controversial report attributed to Harper in 1912 (see elsewhere in this paper) mentions 'huge, hand-like paws'.
29 Joyner, 'History as empirical enquiry', pp. 175–76.
30 F. Allen, *A Big Look Out*, Wyndham, 1983.
31 Allen to Joyner, 9 March 1972, in the recipient's possession.
32 *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, Melbourne, 1983, p. 483.
33 *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 26 October 1912, 4. See also Joyner, *Hairy Man*, p. 17.
34 *Sun*, 10 November 1912, p. 13. See also Joyner, *Hairy Man*, pp. 18–20.
35 Colin P. Groves, 'The Yahoo and "Hominoid" Psychology' [Response to Joyner], *Cryptozoology*, vol. 8, 1989, p. 141.
36 For Harper's own surviving papers see his Letterbook, 1865, MS 2166, NLA, Canberra, and various letters about mineral samples dated 1899–1910 in series 9, Letters Received, 1889–1926, AM, Sydney.
37 *Moruya Examiner*, 16 March 1912, p. 2.
38 Joyner, 'The meaning of *yahoo* and *dulugal*', pp. 27–28.
39 Diana Kelloway Eades, *The Dharawal and Dhurga Languages of the New South Wales South Coast*, Canberra, 1976, p. 78.
40 For a full discussion of this issue see Joyner, 'The meaning of *yahoo* and *dulugal*'.
41 Joyner, 'The meaning of *yahoo* and *dulugal*', p. 31. The date was 1966.
42 R.B. Walker, *The Newspaper Press in New South Wales, 1803–1920*, Sydney, 1976, pp. 108–109.
43 *Sun*, 24 November 1912, p. 13.
44 Note the following remarks by the former Director of the Australian Museum: 'Once physical evidence is found (by this I mean a body …), then the issue would gain some standing'. D.J.G. Griffin to H.H.E. Loofs-Wissowa, 22 August 1986; a copy is in the present writer's possession. The issue here was the possible continuing existence of Neanderthal man. See also Robert Paddle, *The last Tasmanian tiger: The history and extinction of the thylacine*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 9, 23 and 24. Paddle rightly rejects accounts of post-1936 sightings at their face value but his solution is to demand a body, a position which he considers has the status of a principle. However, neither an objection to sightings nor a demand for a body is, as he supposes, a matter of principle but one of practicality—it is hard to confirm data from sightings whereas a body has obvious advantages. Exercising better judgment, he finds that the possible presence of the thylacine on the mainland until the 1840s cannot reasonably be constrained by this post-extinction criterion, and suggests a method of corroboration through cross-cultural correlation.
45 For the platypus' eggs and marsupial reproduction see Kathleen Garnette Dugan, 'Marsupials and Monotremes in Pre-Darwinian Theory', PhD thesis, University of Kansas, 1980. See also Jacob W. Gruber, 'Does the platypus lay eggs? The history of an event in science', *Archives of Natural History*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1991, pp. 51–123. There is no satisfactory account of the discovery of the lungfish.